

PRESS RELEASE

The Cleveland Museum of Art

Public Relations / 11150 East Blvd. / Cleveland, Ohio 44106 / 216 421-7340

December 20, 1979

FOR RELEASE ON RECEIPT

LONG LOST MEDIEVAL SCULPTURE ON DISPLAY AT THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Sculpture from Notre-Dame, Paris: A Dramatic Discovery, an exhibition on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art through January 27, brings to this country twelve pieces of gothic statuary that are part of one of the most important discoveries of all time in the field of medieval art. Also included in the exhibition is a head of King David owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In April of 1977, more than 300 fragments of sculpture were unearthed from a courtyard in Paris where they had laid for nearly 200 years. They were later identified as pieces of the statues that had been torn from the façade and north transept of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris during the French Revolution. Found among the fragments were most of the heads from 28 monumental sculptures of the kings of Judah that had stood under arcades extending across the main façade of the cathedral. Mistaken for representations of the kings of France and denounced as symbols of superstition and feudalism, the statues were ordered destroyed by the Paris City Council in October, 1793.

A scaffolding was erected, and the statues, which were attached to the wall behind them by iron clamps, were beheaded. After the heads had been sent tumbling to the street below, the bodies were freed from the iron clamps and the stone about the shoulders chipped away to make them easily pass through the columns of the arcades. Then they were pried from the façade by means of a lever and sent crashing to the ground. The work was done thoroughly, efficiently, and quickly. All the heads lost their noses and other parts of their faces when they fell, and some broke up completely.

(more)

2-sculpture from notre-dame

The pavement of the street below had caved in under the weight of the destroyed sculptures, and in order to fix it and clear the space in front of the cathedral--renamed The Temple of Reason--the statues were piled along the north side of the building.

Three years later, in 1796, the pile of statuary had become a city dump and the Minister of the Interior ordered it to be disposed of as construction material. A great number of fragments were rescued by a Catholic royalist lawyer, LaKanal, brother of the deputy who voted for the death of Louis XVI at the Convention Nationale. The "holy relics" were buried beneath the paved courtyard of a neo-classical house LaKanal had just built on Caumartin Street. The house much later became an annex of the Banque Française du Commerce Extérieur. In 1977 the Banque began routine repairs, and the fragments were discovered.

The Banque and its director, François Giscard d'Estaing (a cousin of the President of France), have generously allowed some of the pieces in its possession to be exhibited in this country. The oldest pieces were carved after 1150, the kings' heads ca. 1220, and the transept sculptures after 1250. Six of the heads from the Gallery of the Kings, a number of fragments of statue-columns from the portal of Saint Anne, heads from the portal of the Coronation of the Virgin and the northern transept, plus a head of King David loaned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, will be on view in Cleveland.

Visitors to the Cathedral of Notre-Dame today see in place of the original statuary, nineteenth-century replicas, which are somewhat inaccurate stylistically. Study of the 700-year-old fragments has shown that, had the façade of Notre-Dame Cathedral remained intact, its ensemble of sculptures would have ranked with those of the Chartres or Rheims cathedrals. Though mutilated, the pieces in the exhibition are a haunting reminder of a nobility that once graced one of the most magnificent buildings of medieval Europe.

3-sculpture from notre-dame

The exhibition was organized in collaboration with Hubert Landais (director of the Museums of France), A. Erlande-Brandenburg (director of the Cluny Museum in Paris), the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and The Cleveland Museum of Art. A catalog has been written by Carmen Gómez-Moreno, curator of Medieval Art at the Metropolitan, with a foreword co-authored by Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum, and Sherman E. Lee, director of The Cleveland Museum of Art. The catalog is available at the Museum sales desk for \$2.00.

Free gallery talks will be given in the exhibition gallery at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, January 16, and Sunday, January 20. A series of free lectures will be presented by Mark Johnson, an instructor in the Department of Art History and Education at The Cleveland Museum of Art, on three consecutive Thursdays in January at 1:30 p.m. The January 10 lecture will be "Early History and Construction of the Cathedral;" January 17 will be "Sculptural Program of Notre-Dame;" and January 24 will be "The Influence of Notre-Dame and Its Later History."

The Cleveland showing of Sculpture from Notre-Dame, Paris: A Dramatic Discovery is assisted by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

#

For additional information or photographs, please contact the Public Relations Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.